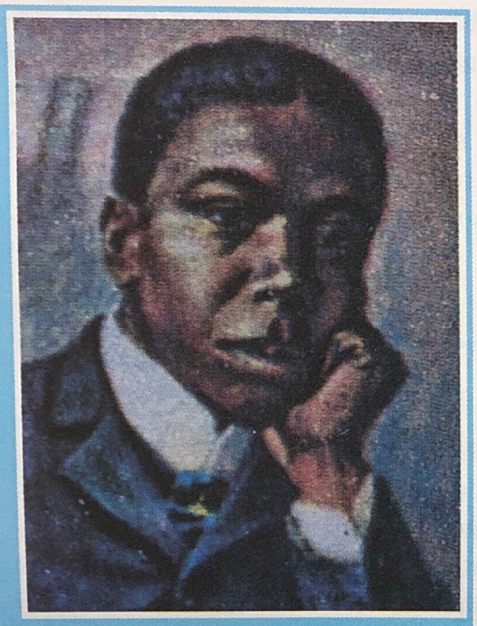
PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR



1872–1906

The first black American to support himself entirely by writing, Paul Laurence Dunbar displayed great versatility as a writer throughout his short career. Dunbar wrote poems, both in a formal, elegant style and in black dialect, and he wrote several novels and numerous short stories.

Dunbar was born in Dayton, Ohio, the son of former slaves. Encouraged by his mother, he began writing poetry at an early age. During high school, Dunbar, who was the only black student in his class, frequently recited his poetry before school assemblies. He also served as the president of the literary society, as class poet, and as editor of the school newspaper.

Following his graduation, he supported himself by working as an elevator operator while continuing to write. He first earned recognition among writers and critics in 1892, when he gave a poetry reading during a meeting of the Western Association of Writers. A year later he published his first collection of poetry, *Oak and Ivy*. In 1895 he published a second collection, *Majors and Minors* (1895), which was received by critics with great enthusiasm. In fact, William Dean Howells, the leading critic of the day, was so impressed with the book that he wrote an introduction for Dunbar's next collection, *Lyrics of a Lowly Life* (1896), which sold over twelve thousand copies and established Dunbar as a widely read and admired American poet.

Dunbar went on to write three more volumes of poetry, four novels, and four volumes of short stories. Dunbar's fiction often focused on daily life in the lost world of the southern plantation. Sometimes, however, it revolved around social problems facing black people in midwestern towns and urban ghettos. His characters included farmers, politicians, preachers, traders, entertainers, and professional people.

Dunbar, however, thought of himself primarily as a poet. He gave readings throughout the United States and Europe. Unfortunately, his life was cut short by tuberculosis in 1906. By the end of his life, his poetry was so popular that he was able to write from Florida, "Down here one finds my poems recited everywhere." One biographer has commented that "young blacks recited his poems and saw in turn what was possible for them."

Despite his success as a poet, Dunbar was disillusioned by the critics' tendency to focus on his poetry written in black dialect, while virtually ignoring his more formal verse. In poems such as "Douglass" and "We Wear the Mask," Dunbar demonstrates a command of the English language that was often overlooked, capturing the despair of black people in a dignified, graceful manner.

GUIDE FOR INTERPRETING

We Wear the Mask; Douglass

Literary Forms

The Sonnet. A sonnet is a fourteen-line lyric poem, usually written in rhymed iambic pentameter—verse with five feet per line, each foot consisting of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable. A sonnet usually expresses a single complete idea or theme.

The two most common types of sonnets are *English sonnets,* or *Shakespearean sonnets* (named after English playwright William Shakespeare), and *Italian sonnets,* or *Petrarchan sonnets* (named after the fourteenth-century Italian poet Francesco Petrarch). English sonnets are composed of three quatrains (four-line stanzas) followed by a couplet (two rhyming lines), with the rhyme scheme *abab cdcd efef gg.* In most English sonnets, the main idea is presented and developed in the three quatrains, and the couplet offers a conclusion. Italian sonnets consist of an octave (eight lines) followed by a sestet (six lines), usually rhyming *abbaabba cdecde* or *abbaabba cdcdcd.* In some Italian sonnets, a question is raised in the octave and the answer is presented in the sestet. In other Italian sonnets, a single idea is presented in the octave and either developed or contradicted in the sestet.

Focus

In "Douglass" Paul Laurence Dunbar addresses the deceased black leader Frederick Douglass and expresses his people's feelings of despair and their need for Douglass's guidance and comfort. Review the excerpt from Douglass's autobiography (pages 364–368). Then list reasons why Dunbar might have chosen to address his poem to Douglass.

Primary Source

Paul Laurence Dunbar wrote against a backdrop of grave racial injustice. In a July 1903 letter, he used ironic commentary about Independence Day to express his feelings about the situation of black people. Parts of the letter follow.

> [W]e have celebrated the Nation's birthday. Yes, and we black folks have celebrated. . . .
>
> Like a dark cloud, pregnant with terror and destruction, disenfranchisement has spread its wings over our brethren of the South. Like the same dark cloud, industrial prejudice glooms above us in the North. . . . And yet we celebrate. . . .
>
> [W]ith bleeding hands uplifted, still sore and smarting from long beating at the door of opportunity, we raise our voices and sing, "My Country, 'Tis of Thee"; . . . while from the four points of the compass comes our brothers' unavailing cry, and so we celebrate.

We Wear the Mask

Paul Laurence Dunbar

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes—
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties.

Why should the world be overwise,
In counting all our tears and sighs?
Nay, let them only see us, while
We wear the mask.

We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries
To thee from tortured souls arise.
We sing, but oh the clay is vile
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
But let the world dream otherwise,
We wear the mask!

Responding to the Selection

Your Response

1. What emotions does this poem evoke in you? Why?
2. What effect do you think a mask can have on the person who wears it?

Interpreting

3. (a) Who is the speaker of the poem? (b) How would you describe the speaker's emotional state?
4. What does the mask symbolize?
5. (a) Whom does the mask deceive? (b) Why do you think the speaker chooses not to reveal what is hidden beneath the mask?
6. What is the theme of the poem?

Applying

7. Like the speaker in this poem, most people at times hide their true feelings. Why do you think this is so? Explain your answer.

Learning Options

1. **Multicultural Activity.** People throughout the world have made and used masks since the Stone Age. Explore the types of masks used in various cultures. Choose a culture that interests you. Create a replica or drawing of a mask used in that culture.
2. **Cross-curricular Connection.** In "We Wear the Mask," Dunbar expresses the pain experienced by African Americans in the post-Civil War years. In the letter excerpted on page 531, he comments specifically about disenfranchisement in the South and industrial prejudice in the North. Find out how pervasive racial discrimination was in the United States during Dunbar's lifetime (1872–1906). How were northern blacks excluded from industry? How did southern blacks lose political and social rights? Share your findings with the class.

Commentary

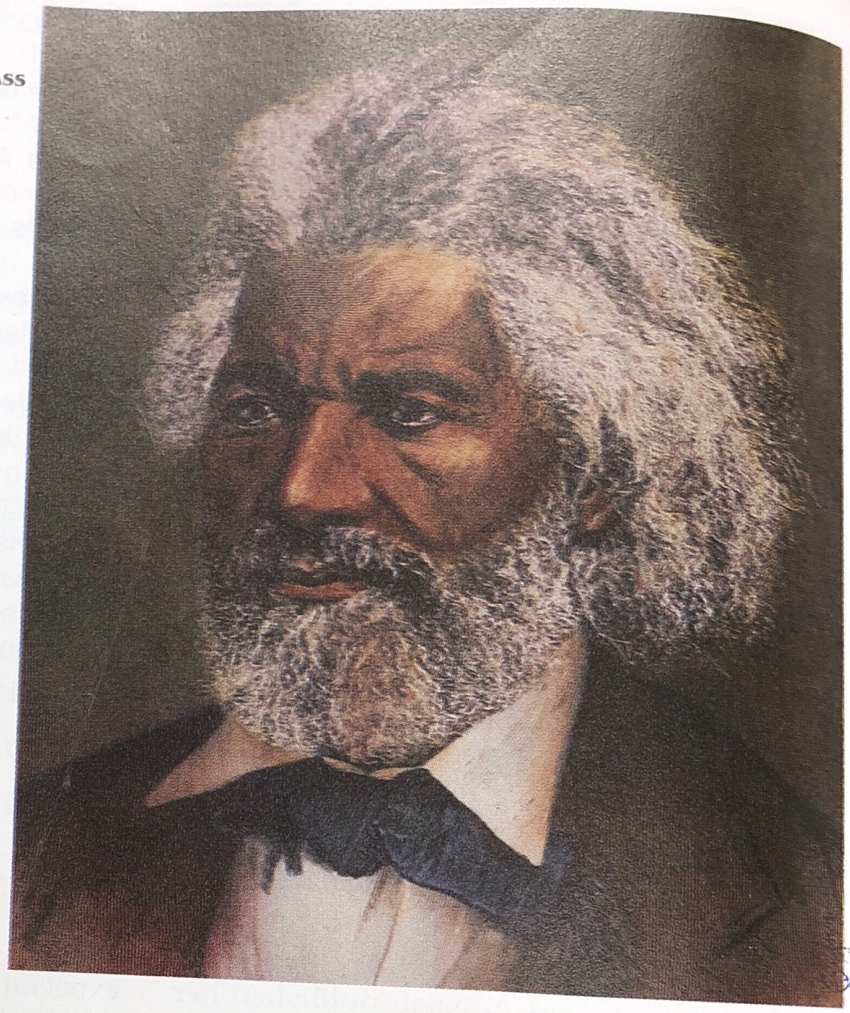
In 1970 Maya Angelou published her autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings,* drawing the title from the Paul Laurence Dunbar poem "Sympathy."

I know why the caged bird sings, ah me,
  When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore,—
When he beats his bars and he would be free;
It is not a carol of joy or glee,
  But a prayer that he sends from his heart's deep core,
But a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings—
I know why the caged bird sings!

Dunbar's "sympathy" for the caged bird grew out of his experience as a black writer forced by circumstances to write for a predominantly white audience. Caged by the expectations of the marketplace, most of Dunbar's poetry and fiction avoided questions of critical importance to him, questions having to do with ending discrimination and racial hatred. Dunbar was the caged bird who sang to keep from shouting out his grief, who laughed to keep from crying.

As a girl Maya Angelou absorbed much of Dunbar's poetry. Like Dunbar, she grew up in a setting that seemed to cage her with discrimination. In her autobiography she detailed how in her rural Arkansas town "whitefolks could[n't] be talked to at all without risking one's life."

Angelou defied discrimination to become a successful writer. She dedicated her autobiography to her son and "all the strong black birds of promise who defy the odds and gods and sing their songs."



FREDERICK DOUGLASS

Douglass

Paul Laurence Dunbar

Ah, Douglass,[1] we have fall'n on evil days,
Such days as thou, not even thou didst know,
When thee, the eyes of that harsh long ago
Saw, salient, at the cross of devious ways,
And all the country heard thee with amaze.
Not ended then, the passionate ebb and flow,
The awful tide that battled to and fro;
We ride amid a tempest of dispraise.

Now, when the waves of swift dissension swarm,
And Honor, the strong pilot, lieth stark,
Oh, for thy voice high-sounding o'er the storm,
For thy strong arm to guide the shivering bark,[2]
The blast-defying power of thy form,
To give us comfort through the lonely dark.

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1. **Douglass:** Frederick Douglass, an American abolitionist (1817?–1895).
2. **bark:** Boat.

Responding to the Selection

Your Response

1. Why do you think the poet chose to address Frederick Douglass?
2. What historical figure would you choose as a role model? Why? What would you say to or request of him or her?

Interpreting

3. Summarize the main idea of the poem.
4. (a) To what does the speaker compare the plight of the black people? (b) What role does the speaker propose Douglass take?
5. What apparently prompted Dunbar to write this poem?

Applying

6. How do you think Dunbar might characterize the present times?
7. (a) What black leaders might the speaker have called on had the poem been written today? (b) How do their efforts on behalf of African Americans compare with Douglass's?

Analyzing Literature

Recognizing a Sonnet

A **sonnet** is a fourteen-line lyric poem. Sonnets are usually written in rhymed iambic pentameter and express a single, complete thought. The two most common types of sonnets are the English sonnet, or Shakespearean sonnet, and the Italian sonnet, or Petrarchan sonnet. "Douglass" is an example of an Italian sonnet.

1. What is the theme expressed in "Douglass"?
2. At what point in the poem does Dunbar present the main idea?
3. How is the main idea developed in the sestet?
4. How does Dunbar's use of the sonnet form contribute to the poem's effectiveness?

Thinking and Writing

Writing a Sonnet

Write a sonnet in which you address an important historical figure, as Dunbar does in "Douglass." Start by thinking of a historical figure who had an important impact on American society. For example, you might select Martin Luther King, Jr., Abraham Lincoln, or Abigail Adams. How would this person respond to contemporary life? Then write a sonnet focusing on issues concerning contemporary society that would be of interest to this person. When you finish writing, revise your sonnet and share it with your classmates.

Commentary

Frederick Douglass was aware of Paul Laurence Dunbar's poetry and once commented to a friend, "He is very young but there is no doubt he is a poet." Dunbar for his part was a youthful admirer of Douglass. The two met in 1893.

At that time Douglass, then almost eighty, was commissioner in charge of the Haitian Pavilion at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago—the first world's fair. He hired Dunbar to be a clerk, paying him out of his own pocket.

Douglass's interest and encouragement helped Dunbar at a key moment in his life. At the Exposition he met other black people active in the arts or in the pursuit of civil rights. His newfound friends included poets and performers.

Dunbar wrote two poems about Douglass, the one you just read and one titled "Frederick Douglass." In this earlier poem, Dunbar celebrated Douglass as a man who was "no soft-tongued apologist." The poem noted, "His heart, his talents, and his hands were free / To all who truly needed aught of him."